

Statement by Representative James A. Leach
Chairman, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific
Hearing on "United States Interests in Northeast Asia"
May 26, 2005

On behalf of the Subcommittee, I would like to welcome our distinguished witnesses to our hearing this morning. We are fortunate today to have with us Christopher R. Hill, the new Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific, who is making his inaugural appearance before the Subcommittee today. Assistant Secretary Hill has just returned from a tour of the region and we look forward to hearing his impressions of the trip. Likewise, although he is well-known to this Subcommittee, also making his first appearance before us is Richard P. Lawless, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asia and the Pacific. The Subcommittee extends a hearty welcome to you both.

The purpose of today's hearing is to review recent developments in Northeast Asia and their potential impact on U.S. policy and our broader national interests.

As my colleagues understand, Northeast Asia remains a central element of United States foreign and strategic policy even as other concerns such as global terrorism and the situation in the Middle East dominate the foreign policy headlines. The compelling nature of American economic, political and security interests in this region are well understood and require little elaboration.

There is nothing more difficult than to attempt to put perspective on events of the day because many issues can only be understood clearly, if at all, with the passage of time. But if we ask what is new on the rapidly transforming landscape of Northeast Asia it seems to me that four issues stand out:

- The heightened danger of political-military confrontation on the Korean peninsula and, to a lesser extent perhaps, the Taiwan Strait. Averting war in Asia has to be America's most important geopolitical challenge in our relations with the world today. Given the various traumas in the Middle East and Persian Gulf, conflict in Asia could untenably stretch American resources while unleashing regional dynamics that would be sharply inimical to U.S. interests.
- Rising American citizen angst about China. While Taiwan is the geopolitical trigger point in U.S.-China relations, trade is the emerging challenge. It is the assumption of most Western economists that trade is mutually advantageous and that free markets are more likely to lead to ties that bind rather than cause friction. But the more unbalanced a trade relationship is, the greater the likelihood that tension will build. Citizen concerns about human rights, the imbalance of trade, the outsourcing of jobs, the piracy of intellectual property, and currency manipulation are real. Tension is palpable.

- Evidence of increasing antagonism between countries in the region, the causes of which have little to do with the United States. For a variety of reasons, it would appear that great power rivalry is on the rise in Northeast Asia, with its attendant potential to create uncertainty and foster regional instability. Attentive American concern, robust engagement, and steady leadership are vital if peace and prosperity are to be preserved in this historic cockpit of geopolitical conflict.
- The transformation of America's strategic alliances. Our treaty-based alliances with Japan and South Korea have long been integral to American policy toward Northeast Asia. The U.S. is now in the process of adapting its military forces worldwide, a development which has large implications for the entire Asia-Pacific region. From a Congressional perspective, it should be understood that these adjustments will enhance U.S. strategic capabilities; that our commitments will remain steadfast and our alliances unquestioned as the process of defense transformation moves forward.

Before turning to our witnesses, I would like to return to the issue of North Korea. There are few parallels in history in which the U.S. has found itself with a less appealing menu of options than with North Korea. Pyongyang's nuclear program and its potential export of weapons of mass destruction have profound implications for regional stability, the international nonproliferation regime, and terrorist threats to the United States.

In this context, the U.S. should recognize that while the six-party framework makes eminently good sense, there is nothing theological about negotiating methodology. Just as we have bilateral discussions within a six-party framework, we can have informal or formal bilateral discussions in other frameworks. Likewise, given the lack of substantive progress, the question of whether supplementary or alternative approaches should be considered must be put on the table. At a minimum, we should be prepared to discuss all issues with the DPRK without precondition in the context of the six-party process.

Whatever the framework, any reasonable prospect of success for a negotiating process will require the active support of other parties, at least two of whom (South Korea and Japan) are also robust democracies. America must thus be mindful that there are public sensibilities in the region and, despite the invectives of the North, restrain from rhetorical excesses which, no matter how valid, may provide unnecessary fodder for distraction, delay, or evasion by North Korea. Realistic diplomacy demands an emphasis be placed on issues, rather than name calling of leaders or countries.

There is simply no credible alternative to attentive engagement with the North. It is entirely conceivable that North Korea is determined to strengthen its military hand with a nuclear weapons capacity. But as untrustworthy as the regime is, it is nevertheless in our interest to use the next round of six-party talks, whenever it may occur, to offer a clearer vision of the advantages that may accrue to Pyongyang if it abandons its march toward nuclearization.

The challenge for all of us is to develop a basis for rational discourse and rational compromise. Here it would appear self-evident that in exchange for North Korea's

denuclearization and relaxation of controls on its own citizens, the U.S. should be prepared to take steps toward normalizing relations with North Korea and facilitating its participation in the broader international community. But the exact opposite could easily occur if North Korea continues to move increasingly in a nuclear direction. In that case, the question will become not only how other parties look at the issues, but how much they may be willing to press North Korea in convincing ways to change its policies.

It is often noted that China has been helpful in advancing a six-party framework for discussions. But there is a growing assessment in Washington that, as helpful as China has been, in a profound sense it has not been nearly helpful enough. As the nuclear showdown with North Korea grows more acute, there could well be an American backlash against China if the P.R.C. is perceived as refusing to modify its role as North Korea's indispensable benefactor. This combination of developments would have ironic elements insofar as China shares a powerful vested interest against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the region, and is itself being put down by the North Koreans in Chinese-led efforts to advance six-party diplomacy. But in the absence of substantive progress on the North Korean front, ramifications could be large not only for U.S. policy on the Korean Peninsula, but for U.S.-China relations in general.

Good policy demands good timing, and the judgment call of the day on the Korean Peninsula is the question of time. Whose side is it on? With each passing month, North Korea increases its nuclear weapons capacities. As a consequence, the odds may have increased that Pyongyang could export nuclear weapons or fissile material to foreign governments, shadowy middlemen, or even terrorists. On the other hand, the history of the 20th century has shown that governments which lack democratic legitimacy and fail to give their people the opportunity for a decent life are vulnerable to rapid internal implosion. Military might is simply no substitute for societal attention to human concerns.

There are different judgment calls for all governments at all times. The truly strategic choices that have to be confronted in the region need to be made in Pyongyang. This does not mean that decisions and attitudinal approaches in Seoul are inconsequential, or that policy choices for Beijing, Tokyo, and Washington are not critical. But it bears continuous recollection that the party that threatens stability in Northeast Asia is North Korea. The other five parties to the six-party process must take care not to fault each other for the dilemmas created by Pyongyang's singular intransigence.

In conclusion, permit me to speculate about what may be the most unlikely of possibilities. We should not underestimate – indeed we should publicly trumpet – the fact that Pyongyang has the power to effect historic changes that would dramatically benefit North Korea's stature in the world and the welfare of its people. A credible change in strategic direction away from isolation, repression, and nuclearization would put the DPRK's international footing on a basis of amity and cooperation, with prosperity in close reach. One of our many tasks in the weeks ahead is to make that previously unthinkable possibility easier for the North Korean leadership to imagine.
